

## 'I love him... Is that real?' Interrogating Romance in *Dollhouse*

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A *Dollhouse* Confession (not mine!), website

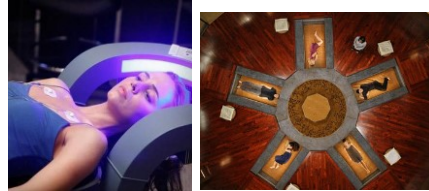
Because of Joss Whedon's commitment to what he regularly calls feminism in interviews and commentaries, the Whedon creations have consistently interrogated the myth of heterosexual romance. Long-running TV shows like *Buffy* and *Angel* offered wide scope for examining romance alongside other aspects of gender and sexuality. The mix of conventions in these earlier shows also lend themselves to negotiating romance from different angles, whether this is about characters growing up and changing their own ideas about romantic and sexual relationships, or what you can 'get away with' in a fantasy show about vampires. *Firefly* featured both a happily married couple and a sex-worker, neither common-place in network TV drama, allowing that shorter-lived series to move away from obvious conventions of romance. And then there's *Dollhouse*, where almost all of the characters are either prostitutes or pimps. Melissa Milavec and Sharon Kaye suggest that *Buffy* 'owes much of its popularity to making erotic love a dominant theme' (2003: 174): *Dollhouse* may owe its lack of popularity to the way it treats much the same theme in a more disturbing fashion.

'Like every good fairy tale, the story grows more intricate, and more divisive, every decade,' says a reporter of *Dollhouse* rumours in 'The Man on the Street' (*Dollhouse* 1.6). His words are equally applicable to the myth of heterosexual romance as tackled by the Whedonverses on TV. The Whedon shows offer a sustained interrogation of gender, but are complicated by the demands of mainstream entertainment. The premise of *Dollhouse* apparently continues both trends. Clients rent romantic and sexual fantasies embodied by a Doll and romance becomes prostitution. As Cynthea Masson points out, this led some viewers to read the show as brutally misogynistic (2010). Yet, since the Dolls have new identities downloaded for each new engagement, *Dollhouse* puts the notion of gender (and sexuality and romance) as social construction and performance front and centre.

Yet, the show's premise also means that character development does not work in the usual ways. One means of encouraging audience identification with the Dolls and widening engagement with them beyond Echo, is the romantic connection between Victor and Sierra. This relationship humanises the Dolls and creates sympathetic characters. It also suggests that the Dolls retain some form of essential identity, since this romance manifests as a connection between Priya and Tony as well as Sierra and Victor. These two are the only characters for whom romance remains relatively untarnished, and their relationship also provides hope in the dystopian atmosphere of the *Dollhouse*-verse. This paper examines how the notion that Sierra and Victor have some form of essential connection, that they are soulmates, is tackled in the context of genre, and how it affects the show's (and the Whedonverses') negotiation of heterosexual romance, subjectivity and free will.

Jan Johnson-Smith articulates the way that background in science fiction is often foreground. That is, SF generally strives for 'an inversion of... the "mundane" (...) through the foregrounding of the background—psychological, physical, or geographical' (Johnson-Smith 2005, 4). Thus, features that in other genres might

remain background details supporting the story unfolding in the foreground, in SF become the stuff that tells us this *is* SF and that often *become* the story. In *Dollhouse*, for instance, the luxurious but bland atmosphere of the LA House is largely created through set design, costume, and actor movement, while the chair and its apparatus demonstrate and make concrete more sinister aspects of the 'tech'.



Language frequently features this way in SF, with novel terms often littering the dialogue without being explicitly defined or explained. These might even be familiar words turned to new meanings (actives, engagements, dolls), a rendering of the genre's ability to estrange the familiar. As Lillian Deritter ('The use of the word "Doll" to describe actives immediately charged the universe... in terms of gender' Deritter 2010, 199), Hugh H. Davis, and Tom Connelly and Shelley S. Rees all point out, much of the language adapted in this way for *Dollhouse* is already loaded in terms of gender, forcing us to reappraise what these words usually mean and how they operate here.

Victor and Sierra's relationship, I suggest, functions as background/ foreground, contributing to the show's exposure of heterosexual romantic myth. These two characters are often in the background or on the periphery of a scene, yet their actions and their connection serve a key purpose in the construction of the show.



The core of much new SF drama on TV is character and emotional realism rather than, or as well as, spectacle, action and special effects. The Whedon shows have always delivered emotional realism no matter how far-fetched their premise. Of course, emotional realism is a suspect concept itself in the *Dollhouse* since Dolls can be programmed to feel rather than simply to perform. As Adelle DeWitt tells a client in 'The Target': 'She won't lie to you, Mr Connell. Everything you want, everything you need, she will be—honestly and completely' (1.2).

Moreover, all the Whedon shows demonstrate how emphasis on character and self-conscious feminism can clash with genre and narrative conventions as I noted in my paper at the very first *Slayage* conference. The deferral or denial of romantic fulfilment also, obviously, works well in serial drama, one reason that Whedon had to argue for a married couple on board ship in *Firefly*. Despite the romantic wish to love 'forever' serial narrative ensures otherwise (Saxey 2001: 196; Jowett SC1).

On a structural level, Sierra and Victor's connection is clearly used to make Doll [and other] characters sympathetic. One of the problems with having characters who take on different personas each time they come out of the chair, sometimes more than once an episode, is that there's little opportunity for development of those characters and engagement with them. The demonstration of feeling—

physical or emotional—between two ‘blank slates’ suggests that it is not only Echo who is still potentially human (and therefore being grossly exploited by Rossum). SF consistently presents emotion as an index of humanity, something that stands in contrast to cold science and technology. Audiences are also cued to sympathise with lovers who love against the odds, as these two do, and who recognise and love each other despite apparently losing all memory and identity. This function of sympathy and empathy is played out by several of characters in the *Dollhouse*, including Boyd, Topher and Adelle. Madeline Muntersbjorn (2010, 19) points out that Topher is redeemed by his response to the revelation of Sierra’s abuse as well as his confirmation that Victor’s love for her is real (the exchange of dialogue I took as the title for this paper ‘I love him. Is that real?/ Yes, it’s real. He loves you back.’ 2.4).

The Sierra-Victor connection is developed throughout the series, but especially in season 2 where we get backstories for both Priya and then Anthony, reinforcing their importance to the narrative. While this is not conventional character development, it serves much the same function. Furthermore, it provides hope in a dystopian world, something emphasised in ‘Epitaph Two: Return’ where we meet their son and see Tony/ Victor reconciled with Priya and introduced to T as his father. This reconciliation operates as shorthand for all kinds of resolution, balancing the grim content of the series and its not-so-happy ending. ‘All of this serves to keep a humanist hero in play. What better representation than a walking reminder of that go-to humanist value, sexual reproduction?’ (Hawk 2010 18). [Here, as elsewhere, I’m skating over some issues that I’ll come back to later]

Do Victor and Sierra function, though, as counterpoint or context, similarity or difference?

Our notions of gender and sexuality, including myths of heterosexual romance, are often seen as social constructions. While certain behaviours and characteristics might seem to be ‘natural’, they are produced through a combination of social convention and repetition and designed to perpetuate patriarchal power. The premise of *Dollhouse* (Whedon calls it ‘societal brainwashing’ DVD1 comm ‘Man’) exposes this in a pretty scary fashion. Whedon notes, ‘Some people were made very uncomfortable because we’re dealing with issues of sexuality and by not explaining it the more it seemed to be the elephant in the room’ (DVD2 ‘Defining Moments’). This discomfort factor accounts for those who saw the show as exploitation rather than *about* exploitation; as a fantasy of dominance and compliance, rather than an exploration of how society perpetuates unequal power relations. Or, as Rhonda Wilcox puts it, ‘Whether we are examining exploitation or participating in it is part of the question Whedon and Dushku put to us’ (2010, 4).

Similarly Muntersbjorn sees the show as ‘provok[ing] us to see ourselves, in all of our deviant detail, as unique yet monstrous amalgams’ of ‘slave, master, serial killer, or mad scientist’, pointing to Whedon’s comment, ‘It’s supposed to be about the sides of us that we don’t want people to see’ (Muntersbjorn 2010 8). I don’t think it’s reaching too far to suggest that the latter three have traditionally been gendered male, and the conventions that surround their representation tend to align with traditional masculinity. So following this line, are the sides of us that we don’t want people to see, well, sexist? Or at least complicit in upholding and perpetuating the myth of heterosexual romance? Remember, Whedon also admits to being easily able to identify with more traditional male perspectives: ‘I understand the motivation of the man with the murderous gaze, of the animal, of the terrible objectifying male, ‘cause I’m him’ (Longworth interview, 2002; in Lavery and Burkhead ed. 58).

*Dollhouse* poses questions about technology and humanity, fantasy and reality, identity and subjectivity, about corporate society and control, about power of all kinds. There's already been some detailed scholarship on these aspects, but I think the questions the show asks about romance are equally fascinating. Some of the questions posed by *Dollhouse* about romance include:

Is romance the fantasy and love the real?

Is love selfish?

Do soulmates exist?

I'm not sure how far I can go to answering these questions, so more specifically, in relation to Victor and Sierra:

How is Victor's response to Sierra any different to the other male obsessions in the show?

Does the apparent innocence of their love suggest that society is the problem with romance?

Does the notion that Sierra and Victor are soulmates rule out free will?

How is Victor's response to Sierra any different to the other male obsessions in the show? Much of the existing *Dollhouse* scholarship focuses on Echo and other, more prominent characters, and this seems to be a question nobody is asking. Looking at the rundown of clients, especially in season 1, there's a preponderance of obsessive heterosexual men. Some, like Joel Mynor, may be presented sympathetically, enabling the show to shed light on Paul's obsession with Caroline. Others, like Alpha, are shown to be capable of change. So is Victor's 'love' for Sierra the same or different? One obvious answer that might distinguish Victor is that his love is innocent, contrasting the corrupted versions of 'love supreme' touted by other male characters.

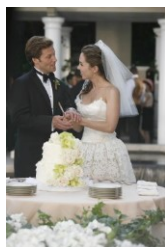
The first evidence of Victor's feelings for Sierra is physical ('man reaction' 1.5 'True Believer'), in keeping with the general depiction of sleazy sexuality in the show. Given the narrative arc that continues into the next episode, Victor's sexual interest in Sierra also allows for confusion about who is abusing her in the *Dollhouse* (1.6 'Man'). Yet this narrative eventually reinforces the sense that Victor's feelings are innocent and other male characters' are not. Still, it's notable in reading about these characters that people tend to cite *Victor's* love for Sierra, not Sierra's love for Victor. Like many of the other obsessive males depicted across the seasons, this 'love' is rather one-sided.



(Man on the Street)

Remember it is Priya whom we see confess her feelings for him, not Sierra, and this doesn't come until season 2. Several commentators (DeRitter, XXXX) note Victor's passivity: is it only this that prevents him from pressing his attention on Sierra? We probably don't want to think so. So can there be such a thing as a good obsession? Is this what we mean by 'love'? If it is, no wonder it's so hard to tell the difference between 'real' love, myths of romance and abuses of power.

When Echo 'marries' in 'Vows' (2.1), we know this stereotypical perfect wedding day is not real. I know people who would sigh with pleasure and delight at an image like this. I also know people who would deride it.



Remember Whedon comments that the whole show demonstrates that 'everything that was sweet was kind of creepy' (Whedon 'Looking Back' DVD2). 'Victor wants to pretend. He pretends we're married' Sierra tells Dr. Saunders in 'Man on the Street'.



'everything that was sweet was kind of creepy'? (Whedon)

Perhaps this folding together of creepy/sweet partially accounts for the often contradictory ways the show's writers, creators, and viewers talk about romance in *Dollhouse*. On the DVD commentary to 'Belonging' for instance, Jed Whedon uses 'friendship' to describe Sierra and Victor's relationship, and a little later Maurissa Tanchareon calls it 'true love' (DVD2 comm 'Belonging'). Given the apparent 'innocence' of Victor's feelings, something echoed by actor Enver Gjokaj (DVD 2 'Looking Back'), it's not surprising that we never see Sierra and Victor in a sexual scene, despite his 'man reactions' to her. During 'The Attic' (2.10) Priya's nightmare transforms sex with Anthony into abuse from Nolan, whom she stabs.



This sexual activity is thus distanced from the Dolls: it takes place in a dream space, and it features Anthony and Priya, not Victor and Sierra. Here, it's fairly overt that something 'sweet' turns into something 'creepy' since the Attic sets up loops to imprison its victims. [NB Anthony's loop has nothing to do with Priya: until 'Needs' he's never met her as Anthony, only as Victor].

Furthermore, by virtue of Victor and Sierra being Dolls, Victor's feelings might seem to be more authentic than other emotional or sexual connections because they don't rely on social context or performance of social roles. This starts to answer my second question. Is society to blame for the problems attendant on the myth of heterosexual romance? This isn't really about love in general: memory wipes were integral to the plots of both *Buffy* and *Angel*, as I noted at this conference two years ago. In those cases, the love that persisted regardless of memory loss was a family bond between sisters Buffy and Dawn, or parent and child Angel and Connor. *Dollhouse* has a more difficult task in asking whether 'love' can be shorn of the myth of heterosexual romance.



One of the answers is that there is no soul, it's just physical. Connelly and Rees note the way Dolls are compared to animals:

In a sense, they exist as their animal selves, eschewing what Marx describes as “conscious life activity” (75) for an existence that invites Topher to label them “a little bit bison” (“Gray Hour” 1.4) and Bennett Halverson to call them “free range chickens” in comparison to the Washington D.C. actives, whom she says are kept more “like veal” (“Getting Closer” 2.11). (Connelly and Rees 2010 9)

Such descriptions are, entirely consciously, I'm sure, distasteful, especially by the second season where we have come to know individual Dolls as, well, individuals. To describe the tabula rasa Dolls as animals is an obvious form of dehumanisation, and has a long history in the language of slavery and oppression. Including (background) scenes where we see Dolls engaging in artistic activities as well as physical ones offers a counterbalance to this 'animal' instinct. Like emotion, aesthetic appreciation is often used in SF (*2001*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek NG*) as a measure of humanity, something that distinguishes us as self-conscious, intelligent life.

Moreover, the suggestion that without memories and social identity, we are simply instinctive animals threatens Western society's highly-valued notions of individuality and free will. If we're just animals, the fittest survive, and sex is simply a means to reproduction. In 'Imprint' (2.2) the title suggests that Echo is programmed with maternal feeling, potentially challenging this 'natural' urge, even if it is happening at a 'glandular level'. Yet Madeline's overwhelming grief for her lost daughter ('Needs' etc) is what causes her to enter the Dollhouse and become November. So is biological essentialism for 'real' or it is just social imprinting? Options still open. It's not too comfortable, then, to know that Victor and Sierra, as Tony and Priya, are the couple who have a child by the end of the series. Is this the sum of their love? That 'go-to humanist value, sexual reproduction' as Hawk refers to it? Remember, in a post-apocalyptic world, repopulation may be imperative and the default is heterosexuality, as *Battlestar Galactica* demonstrated (see Jowett 2010)—even when it doesn't have to be.

Bronwen Calvert observes that The basic situation of *Dollhouse*'s narrative, ..., certainly raises questions of “what it means to reconfigure the physical body with virtual stimuli” and of whether it is possible to create “a body devoid of all discursive and cultural delimitations” (Hayles 15; Bronfen 117). (Calvert 2010 5). I suppose one reason we're not too comfortable with the idea of the Dolls as just bodies is that this seems to accede to their positioning as actives/ prostitutes/ skinsuits for hire. As Calvert notes, the show *asks* 'whether it is possible' to create an unacculturated body rather than *answering* this question. Even if its answer is yes, and we believe that Victor and Sierra can 'fall in love' and that love persists when they become Priya and Anthony, they still have to live in the world. NB when they are Priya and Tony, in the post-apocalyptic world of Epitaphs 1 and 2, their relationship is more real, and more problematic, than it was as Victor and Sierra.

Is this because while Tony and Priya have choices to make, Victor and Sierra do not? Many of the Whedon shows have tackled fate, predestination and prophecy, tending to uphold the value of choice. Buffy kicked against being the Chosen One, and survived being Prophecy Girl right from the first season (1.12 'some prophecies are a bit dodgy' admits Giles, though the Codex wasn't supposed to be one of them); *Angel* consistently overturned and/or played with the idea of destiny and prophecy, often arguing, as Angel says, 'don't believe everything you're foretold' ('To Shanshu in LA' 1.22). *Firefly* and *Serenity* included stories about mind control (via River) and featured zombies apparently devoid of anything but violent instinct in the Reavers. All three shows valorised free will and the freedom to make choices. *Dr Horrible's Sing-along Blog* takes this to a sinister extreme when Billy chooses to pursue his goal and become supervillain Dr



Horrible rather than win his heterosexual happy ending with Penny. In *Dollhouse*, free will is voluntarily given up by those who sign up to be Dolls.

When the Dolls are temporarily allowed to work through some of their originals' 'issues' in 'Needs' (1.8), and appear to escape the Dollhouse, Priya says they decide for themselves now. Given that this is a plan engineered by those running the LA House, it is not exactly free will. While Echo and other Dolls eventually do escape the Dollhouse, at least partially, and start making decisions about how to resist their slavery, this action in the political sphere is not necessarily paralleled in the private, romantic sphere. If Victor and Sierra are 'soulmates' to the point that Tony and Priya also fall in love, does this suggest that they are they still programmed, acting on some deeper instinct that precludes conscious choice? Is this what love is?

'It's as if I met this woman in a previous life, as though our love transcends our very being' (Roger/Victor to Adelle 'Stop-loss' 2.10)



"it was as if their souls had fallen in love with each other in the absence of the complications of their personalities, and that love continued to grow after their personalities returned" (Morohunfola 2010, 225)

Oluwafemi Morohunfola here states that as well as social pressure and myths of heterosexual romance, personality is also irrelevant. This directly contradicts the (perhaps equally idealised) notion that personality is, or should be, what we fall in love with, rather than, say, an attractive physical appearance, or social status, or economic success, or even the 'correct' gender and/or sexual orientation. This falling in love without personality is clearly not intended to be a return to the animal metaphor, since the soul is a factor here. [An active 'is the truest soul among us,' says Adelle in 'Ghost' 1.1]. Part of me wants to say that this talk of soulmates is nonsense, it's just a way to describe a feeling that may, or may not be an idealisation of accumulated factors that make two people 'fall in love'. Another part of me wants to believe it.



So do Victor and Sierra give us hope that true love exists? If so, what does that say about how we understand 'love' and how invested we are in the myth of heterosexual romance? We want to accept their 'love' at face value, and there are pressing narrative reasons to give the characters a form of 'happy ending' to alleviate the dystopian gloom. It's easy, watching *Dollhouse*, to see the corporate Big Bad and want to fight the power, to debate actuals versus actives, to condemn the objectification of the dolls. It's less easy, because it's more background, to fight our own, programmed, desire to see 'true love' triumph, to challenge the myths of heterosexual romance, including the notion of soulmates. Not everyone wants to be challenged in that way. But this is what SF is for. The estrangement or defamiliarization strategies of SF are tools to enable us to see our own society and our own social programming afresh. When Whedon says

*Dollhouse* is about societal brainwashing, this doesn't just apply to corporate control, it applies also to heteronormativity and the myths of heterosexual romance. It applies to Victor and Sierra as much as to Echo and Paul.

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